

Remarks by the President at Chief of Missions Conference

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THE PRESIDENT: Thank you! Thank you so much. Well, good morning, everybody. I was in the neighborhood, so I thought I'd stop by. Actually, you're in the neighborhood. So I appreciate you for stopping by.

I see a lot of friends and familiar faces. I have visited a lot of the countries where you are serving. I want to thank you once again for putting up with me when I show up, because it's a lot of work. I know my visits are not easy. And your teams do extraordinary work in making sure that our visits are a success -- and I am deeply grateful for that. And when I depart, I am sure that you guys have big wheels up parties. (Laughter.) I'm confident about that.

I'm not here to give a big speech. I wanted to come by and mainly just say thank you. I want to reiterate what I say at every embassy that I visit to your entire time, and that is that you are doing extraordinary work on behalf of America. And because of you, we are safer and more secure, and America's reputation around the world is extraordinarily strong.

Now, that starts with our Secretary of State, John Kerry. We all know that John is tireless. We don't know exactly what he takes. (Laughter.) But 82 foreign trips so far, 80 countries. In one case, five countries in two days. More than 1 million miles. After a long

day of negotiations in foreign capitals, he's been known to explore the finer restaurants -- after midnight. One staffer, who I think is more than half his age, says it's inhuman. (Laughter.) But John is relentless because he knows, as I do, that there is no substitute for American leadership.

There are those who criticize our commitment to diplomacy, for investing so much effort in trying to resolve conflicts that seem intractable. But here's the truth: Conflicts and wars do not end on their own. Breakthroughs do not just happen. Agreements don't write themselves. It takes diplomacy, being willing to sit down with others -- and sometimes with adversaries, sometimes with people whose values are completely contradictory to our own. But as John always says, we have to try.

This Secretary of State from Massachusetts follows on the heels of the original JFK from Massachusetts, who said, "Let us never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate." And we've seen the results, thanks to John, but also, most importantly, thanks to so many of you. An historic democratic transition in Afghanistan. Chemical weapons removed from Syria. The Iran nuclear deal. Detained Americans coming home. The Paris climate agreement. The cessation of hostilities in the Syrian civil war. That's strong, principled diplomacy at work.

And so, John, on behalf of myself and the American people, we want to say thank you for your leadership. (Applause.)

Now, in addition to John, I see Tony and Gayle and Heather, and we get to hang out all the time in the Situation Room. Sometimes we get to come out for fresh air and sunlight. But I know that behind them, there is an incredible team -- all of you, our embassies and posts in every corner of the globe.

And for so many people around the world, both foreign governments and foreign public, you are the voice and the face of the United States. So you don't just convey our interests, you represent our values, you represent our diversity. You and your teams represent the very best of America.

And I say this before some of you when I've gone to visit -- you will hear me say this -- when John arrives in a country, we make a big fuss. But ultimately, what determines people's impressions of the United States is you and your teams who are there in a

sustained way and day in, day out are helping people. Whether it's a business trying to get a visa, or it is a family trying to be reunited, you are solving problems, and that has a ripple effect all across the countries where you are serving.

And I know it's not always easy. Dedicated personnel have made, in some cases, the ultimate sacrifice -- because the world can be dangerous -- including Chris Stevens. And since then, we've lost others. In Afghanistan, Anne Smedinghoff and Abdul Rahman. Our embassy guard in Ankara, Mustafa Akarsu. In Pakistan just this month, two locally employed staff -- Faisal Kahn and Abid Shah. So we remember and we honor their service.

There are real risks involved in being a diplomat. There always have been, and many of those risks are accentuated today. And I know that service can mean sacrifice for families, as well. Some of you serve at unaccompanied posts, which means that you are separated from your loved ones. When families deploy, and spouses and children serve in their own way, we know that they don't always hear directly from the President, so I need you to transmit to them how much we appreciate the work that they do. Let them know that we know they're part of the ambassadorial team as well.

More broadly, I want to thank you for your partnership in what's been a priority for us, and that is renewing American leadership. I believe that a broader vision of American strength that harnesses all elements of our national power, including diplomacy, is what is going to make a difference in this complicated age that we live in. That's how we build a global coalition to deal with Iran -- strong sanctions plus diplomacy. And under the nuclear deal, Iran will not get its hands on a nuclear weapon.

That's how we forged the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which will help to rewrite the rules of trade in the region and reinforce America's rebalance to the Asia Pacific.

That's how we rallied the world to stop Ebola, deploying our own personnel -- military, doctors, USAID, CDC -- in helping our West African partners save countless lives.

That's how we work with countries like China and India and nearly 200 nations to reach the Paris agreement, the most ambitious global agreement ever to fight climate change.

And diplomacy, including having the courage to turn a page on the failed policies of the past, is how we've begun a new chapter of engagement with the people of Cuba. What a historic day it was when John reopened our embassy in Havana. And next week, I look forward to being the first U.S. President to visit Cuba in nearly 90 years -- without a battleship accompanying me. (Laughter.)

Now, we all know how much work we have to do. As I said, I plan to do everything that I can with every minute that I have left in this office to keep making progress and make the world safer, more prosperous, and to deal with the enormous challenges that so many people are burdened with around the world. We will leave it all on the field. And I'm going to need the help and the partnership of all of you as we focus on some key areas coming up.

First and foremost, we've got to continue to keep our nation safe, especially from the threat of terrorism. And all of you have a role to play in that process. We're going to have to continue to strengthen our global coalition against ISIL, whether it's the air campaign, support for local partners, cutting off ISIL financing, preventing the flow of foreign terrorist fighters, working with partners to counter ISIL's bankrupt, nihilistic ideology.

We're going to have to keep pushing on the diplomatic front, because that's the only way that the larger Syrian conflict will end, with a political transition and an inclusive Syrian government.

We're going to have to keep strengthening partnerships from West Africa -- as we saw again yesterday in Côte d'Ivoire -- to Afghanistan. These countries are battling terrorism; they need our help. And we're going to have to keep working with allies and partners to stabilize Libya and Yemen.

We have to keep living up to our values and move ahead on our plan, including safely transferring detainees to finally close the detention center at Guantanamo Bay. We are not going to stop -- (applause) -- making the effort to do that.

So we've got to continue to fight terrorism and do so in a way that's consistent with our values. That's what we've done over these last seven and a half years; that's what we're going to continue to do. And all of you have a role to play. And all of you know that in the countries where you are working, it makes a difference when the perception is that

America is abiding by its values. It makes your job easier. It makes it easier for us to obtain the cooperation that we need. And I'm very proud of the work that we've done so far. But we've got some more work that we have to do.

Second, we're going to have to keep mobilizing the world to meet shared challenges. And that includes strengthening international rules and norms that undergird peace and security. We're going to have to continue to ensure that Iran fully meets its commitments under the nuclear deal; to make sure that we're enforcing effective sanctions on North Korea; that, at our upcoming summit here in Washington, we're continuing to increase nuclear security.

In Europe, with our NATO allies, we're continuing to bolster our common defenses. We are continuing to push to make sure that the Minsk agreement is upheld and that we are supporting Ukraine's right to self-determination.

On climate change, we have to ensure that nations meet their Paris commitments, that the United States does so as well, and that we invest in new clean energy solutions, and help developing countries deal with climate change and ensuring that they do not feel that they have to choose between uplifting their people economically and preserving the planet.

We're going to have to continue to work on transnational threats like cyber-attacks, making sure that we've put in place an architecture so that we have international rules governing that space and there's cooperation. Preventing epidemics through our global health security agenda. Making sure that we are not just reacting to something like the Ebola crisis, but that we are systematically putting in place the kinds of global networks and responses that can help countries not only help their own people, but also make sure that, in an era of international travel and globalization, that our own people are not put in harm's way.

And third, even as we confront threats, we've got to keep partnering with nations and people to seize the incredible opportunities at this moment in history. That means we've got to keep standing up for citizens who are striving to forge their own futures through fair and free elections and open government and insisting on the dignity of all people so that we're respecting human rights around the world.

In the Asia Pacific, we've got to move ahead with our rebalance, strengthening our alliances, partnering with ASEAN, supporting the transition in Myanmar, moving ahead with TPP, and ensuring security and stability in places like the South China Sea.

Here in the Americas, my trip to Cuba and Argentina will underscore how we're focusing on the future -- creating opportunity, growing the region's middle class, helping Colombia achieve peace, and helping Central America reduce violence and poverty.

In Africa, with its enormous economic and human potential, we're going to continue to work with partners to increase trade and investment, lift people out of -- into the middle class, expand access to electricity through Power Africa, and support strong democratic institutions.

Across these regions, we've got to keep forging partnerships that empower young people, entrepreneurs, students through programs like 100,000 Strong in the Americas, or the Young Leaders of the Americas, or YALI in Africa, or YSEALI in Southeast Asia. I will tell you -- and I think some of you who have participated in these -- when we have these meetings with young people in these regions, they are hungry to learn from the United States and to partner with us. And we have to not only focus on challenges and threats, but opportunities and hope. We have to feed what's best in the world and not just try to address what's worst.

And finally, with American leadership, we can mobilize more nations as we stand up for human dignity and institutionalize some of the gains that we've been making in development.

Given the urgency of the global refugee crisis, for example, we're going to need you to press governments to step up with resources that are needed as we prepare for a refugee summit at the margins of UNGA this fall.

We're within reach of the first AIDS-free generation, and we're making major new commitments in our fight to reach another goal, which is a world free of malaria.

If we sustain our commitment to food security through Feed the Future and our New Alliance, we can boost farmers' incomes and help lift tens of millions of people from poverty.

With an enduring commitment to our new Sustainable Development Goals, we're going to advance our objective of ending the injustice of extreme poverty, including for women and girls.

So we've got a lot of work to do. And let's see, we've got about 10-plus months to do it. I have to tell you, though, that I'm confident that we can make significant progress over these next 10 months.

I think over the last three and a half years, people have been calling me a lame duck, and somehow we've gotten a lot done. (Laughter.) And what I always tell my team in the White House, what I tell my Cabinet Secretaries, and what I want to share with all of you is we have this unique honor of serving our country at these challenging times. And there are some young people here who will continue to serve our country in various capacities in the future. But for many of us, this is the point at which we will have the most impact, have the capacity to do the most good that we may ever have in our lives. What an incredible honor. And what an incentive for us to make sure that we squeeze every last little bit of good that we can do during these times that we're in these positions.

And the good news is that when we are focused and true to what made us want to do this in the first place, and when we're true to America's best traditions, it's remarkable what we can get done. That's part of the reason why I could not be more optimistic about the future and America's place in the world.

Economically, our businesses have created more than 14 million jobs during the longest consecutive streak of job growth in our history. Our leadership in innovation and technology remains unmatched. Militarily, we are the most powerful nation on Earth by far, with the finest fighting forces the world has ever seen. No other military comes close. Diplomatically, we continue to set the global agenda.

Some of you have participated in international fora, and you know that if the United States isn't right smack dab in the middle of it, if we're not helping to set that agenda, it doesn't happen. People look to us for leadership. (A phone rings.) Somebody is calling right now -- (laughter) -- to see if we've got the answer to some problem.

And because of the values that you and your teams represent every day, because of our commitment to universal human rights and human development and justice and dignity for every human being, people around the world still look to one nation to lead the way -- the United States of America. If there's a problem, they're calling us. If there's an opportunity, they want us to help.

And the reason they do is not just because of the size of our military or the size of our economy, but it's because of our people. Our diplomatic ranks, our staff, our bandwidth, our capacity to focus and bring to bear our best thinking -- that's the thing that truly sets us apart. And our ideals. I don't know that there's ever been a country -- in fact, I know that there has not been a country that was the most powerful in the world, but also saw itself as meeting its own self-interest by advancing the interests of others; that was willing to restrain itself in certain situations in order to build up international norms.

I know that in many of the countries where you serve, there are real challenges. And history doesn't always move forward; sometimes it moves sideways and sometimes it moves backwards. We make gains, and then sometimes we feel losses. And it's typically the bad news that gets reported. But I say this to interns that come in every six months and are full of idealism and enthusiasm, and are trying to get a sense of how they can channel that and focus that, and sometimes they're beating back the cynicism that's being fed to them every day. And I tell them: If you had to choose one time in history in which to be born -- and you didn't know ahead of time who you were going to be or what nationality, what gender, what race, whether you were wealthy or poor -- what moment in history would you choose, you'd choose right now. Because the world has never been healthier or wealthier. Violence has actually ebbed relative to so much of human history. It's never been more tolerant. There's never been more opportunity.

And a lot of that is because of the United States of America. A lot of that is because of you. That's a pretty big deal. That makes the sacrifices worthwhile. I'm very proud of you.

So let's keep it going, and let's finish strong. Let's run through the tape. Tell your families and your teams I appreciate them. Thank you very much. (Applause.)

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11:35 A.M. EDT